

A NOTABLE SHORT STORY BY A FAMOUS WRITER

POPPELWELL'S PAST.

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Popplewell, when he found his present merely prosperous and his future respectably secure, determined to build him a past.

Born in a small town in Wiltshire, he had not been brought up with the idea that some day he might be a school board teacher with what he firmly believed an "influence for good." He was firmly convinced at this matured age that a man to do anything great must have a mate whose aspirations coincide with his own. This, he told his friends, was the ideal life. He selected the maid with becoming care.

When he was 21 a relative who had made a large fortune in Nebraska adopted him as heir. Until this time Popplewell had been wont to regard riches with a cold and condemning eye. He assured his friends that the changed circumstances would enable him to purchase the books for which he had longed.

When Popplewell and his uncle came to town they stayed at a hotel in Brook street, where the price of dinner was more than the school teacher had expended in a month on his meals. He wrote glowing accounts to the maiden who was to share the ideal life with him, but there was an undertone of regret at London's wasted opportunities. The richer classes, he found, were so utterly lost to the sense of duty. He wrote a number of verses on this profound subject and begged Miss Carrie Carter of Devizes not to destroy them, as he proposed producing them in volume form at a later date. Carrie Carter read these poems and essays with reverence, and her young heart overflowed with thankfulness when she reflected on his genius. She was unsophisticated, 17, and had outgrown her strength. Furthermore, large round spectacles detracted from her good looks, and she was excessively nervous. In moments of agitation she would upset furniture. Popplewell had frequently to censure her for the lack of that repose which stamps the caste of *Vere de Vere*. This depressed her exceedingly. Not that Popplewell was a Chesterfield, but he possessed a certain superficial knowledge of things, a Review of Reviews kind of cleverness, which made him looked upon as a coming man. He had once lectured at the local Y. M. C. A. on "The Ethics of Modern Life." Nobody understood the lecture, Popplewell least of all, but it will be seen that he strove after the intellectual.

But when riches came he found that the intellectual was not fashionable except among obscure literary folk who lived in Highbury, Hamstead or Brixton. The true friends of Popplewell were amazed to learn that he had dropped the pursuit of learning, and one of them, seeing him correctly attired in the lobby of a Shaftesbury avenue theatre during the acts, took back the news to Wiltshire that he was on the broad path.

The essays and poems were by this time discontinued, and the letter he wrote to Carrie, preparatory to accompanying his uncle on a tour of the world, was a masterpiece in its way. He conveyed the impression that his soul was in such a state of revolt that marriage was a venture he dared not contemplate. He touched lightly on the hollowness of things, and concluded by saying her influence over him was largely responsible for making him the man he was.

Poor Carrie of the spectacles answered this effusion. The letter reached him at Rouen, and, not without feeling a pang of shame, he sent it back unopened. Popplewell's uncle, who made no pretense at culture, found Paris very much to his taste, and after the world tour made his home there. During the three years they lived in the French capital Popplewell learned to speak a very correct French, and even wrote it with fair success. He was never without a copy of *Verlaine*, which proved indisputably that he was possessed of the true culture. Providence, masquerading in the guise of ptomaine poisoning, removed the uncle from Popplewell's path and left him master of a charming apartment in the Rue d'Antin and £12,000 per annum.

He removed instantly to London, and was enabled, by reason of his membership of a good Parisian club, to gain admission to one in Pall Mall. There were some who were curious as to Popplewell's people, his public school and college, but he soon lived down any doubts as to his eligibility, and was accepted as a good looking, decent mannered rich dilettante who paid his bridge losses with a cheerfulness that was amazing.

But to his intimates Popplewell inferred that he had a romantic past interwoven with the unhappiness of a lady whose husband represented a foreign court at Vienna. Since there are so many changes in the corps diplomatique Popplewell was safe from detection, and the erotic verses he published, had beautifully bound, and presented to his friends were thought to be tribute to the lady who could never be his.

Young girls thought him delightfully wicked, and some mothers feared he was "one of the quiet kind" of whose debaucheries no one need be surprised to learn.

When he was 35 Popplewell determined to marry a woman who could advance him socially.

There was at that time a very brilliant American widow into whose house he had not, so far, been able to gain admittance. It was not that she was very rich or beautiful, but rather that she had attained a position in society due to her wit and charm that attracted Popplewell. His heart was overjoyed when one morning a friend begged a volume of his "Songs After Verlaine" to present to the American charmer.

Mrs. Bertram is very fond of poetry," explained Jevons, "and I told her I had a pal who wrote real hot stuff."

"The phrase is hardly adequate," murmured Popplewell, "but you can have a volume if you want it."

A week later he was introduced to the lady he persisted in thinking of as the Duchess of Towers of Du Maurier's novel. Popplewell fell at her shrine and worshipped.

Jevons could not understand it at all.

"I can't think what she is doing," he said. "She could have had Ardsley, who has a title; Priestly, who is better looking, or Kingsley, who does not pose but is really clever and worth twice as much as this chap."

When Popplewell proposed Mrs. Bertram turned her great blue eyes on him with something of sorrow in them.

"I like you very much," she said, but I suppose I'm an old fashioned woman, for I could not marry a man whose past does not bear looking into. I have heard about a certain Viennese scandal."

Alas poor Popplewell! The scandal he had with such difficulty created was now to be his undoing. He was to be haunted by the ghost of a woman who had never been born!

He asked if she would defer an answer until he could explain everything to her tomorrow. He was naturally much agitated.

He spent the night in thinking what to say. To confess a blameless past was not a pleasant prospect, but to lose his lady was a worse one. Compromise seemed impossible.

On the morrow Popplewell showed that there was still some manhood in him, for he abased himself and told her the truth. She said very little, but told him she would give him an answer when she had thought it over. At present she only liked him better than other men, but that was not enough. Also she asked if he might tell her friends that they had labored under an illusion as to the murkiness of his past. Groaning, Popplewell consented, and beheld his record washed so clean that even a Y. M. C. A. would have accepted him without hesitation.

He dedicated his new volume of verses to her and she seemed so pleased that she gave a dinner to thirty of their intimate friends at her house in Bruton street in honor of the poet. After dinner she was asked to read some of the sonnets.

Popplewell glowed with pride, for Petrarch had not striven harder to make his verses to Laura more perfect than had he to honor his beloved. He knew his verses were good, and he leaned back as she took the dainty volume and

prepared to read. But his heart almost stopped as she read:

Oh, Carrie, my Carrie,
The heart of the town
(Of this most evil town).
Seems to jest at God's frown.
And I fain would not tarry,
But fly back to my own,
My Carrie, my Carrie.

It was some of his disproportionate, ludicrous, bombastic verse written to the Devizes girl fifteen years ago!

There was a shriek of laughter, and every one looked at him for an explanation. He made no motion, and the pitiless verse read more of the damnable doggerel, and then an essay on life and society written from the narrow standpoint of absolute ignorance.

He crept out of the house and made his way to the quiet of Grosvenor square, around which he walked a dozen times, trying to understand what had befallen him. That Mrs. Bertram, the brilliant American widow, was his Carrie he could no longer doubt. Indeed, as he thought of her a dozen little tricks of manner came back to him. But it was all too incomprehensible as yet, and he made his way back to Bruton street to see what she had to say. Popplewell was not wholly a coward.

When it was almost certain that the guests would be gone he returned to the house. Even the well trained footman smiled covertly as he ushered him into the little study to await the possible coming of his duchess.

She swept into the room, magnificent, self contained and haughty.

He rose at her coming and looked her full in the eyes.

"Need you have done it?" he asked quietly.

"There was no more actual need than for you to have written me as you did when you left me."

"Well, you scored cleverly enough," he said wearily. "No revenge could have been more perfect. God! how they laughed. Tell me how it is you have changed from an awkward gauche girl into the woman you are."

"Nothing more wonderful than your own transition. I went to America after you left England and lived with a cousin until I married Mr. Bertram. He was very rich and we lived everywhere. I saw you in Paris years ago; I saw you in Petersburg and Vienna."

He winced. "Then you knew I had lied about my past all the time?"

"I knew," she assented. "I knew all the time. I found I had no need to wear glasses. I learned to dress well, to dance, to walk, and most of all to have the ease of manner that millions and power can buy."

"That's what you did in the book," he said.

"What book?"

"Peter Ibbetson. I have always thought of you as the Duchess of Towers. She was a gawky girl who grew to be magnificent, as you are."

The woman looked at him curiously. She had been prepared for some exhibition of temper, and here he was talking in a dull, dispassionate tone.

"Aren't you angry with me?" she demanded. "Don't you understand that you can never associate with your friends again without being ridiculed? Don't you understand that I plotted this humiliation for you?"

"I understand," he answered. "I deserve it. I behaved like an intolerable cad in the old days."

"Don't you hate me?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Perhaps it is that I am not strong enough to hate the woman I love. I loved you when you and I were boy and girl, but then I loved myself first. Now, now, I love you first, and I am neither lying nor posing when I say that."

"Oh, go away somewhere and hide. You see yourself that I cannot stay here. There is nothing else to do."

"There's one other thing," she said with a little catch in her voice, "you can take me with you."

"Carrie!" he cried in amazement.

She smiled back at him through the tears that were in her eyes, and held out her hands.

"Yes," she said softly, "still your Carrie."—(Copyright).